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## **Learning through Drawing**

Karla G. Bohmbach

When I was in grade school, I loved art period: playing with colors, making a mess, letting my imagination run wild. By the time I reached middle school, not so much: I had learned to compare my work to others', which frequently left me assessing what I did as sub-par, if not a downright embarrassment. This attitude continued and hardened into adulthood, so much so that engaging in any sort of plastic art at all (e.g., sketching, painting, sculpting) became practically anathema to me. Presumably many other academics -- at least those who trade more in words than in pictures -- also share my feelings toward the doing of art.

What happens, then, when a Wabash Center program leader instructs a roomful of religion and theology professors to spend 30 minutes each creating their own artwork? An initial hesitancy and uncertainty gradually morphs into a tentative warming up to the challenge, which then rather quickly turns into lots of smiles, laughter, and positive energy filling the room, eventuating finally in the art's utilization to facilitate one of the most enlightening discussions of the entire workshop.

Joe Favazzo, provost at Stonehill College and leader of a 2013 Wabash Colloquy on religious commitments in the classroom, had tasked the 16 participants (plus 4 co-leaders) with bringing to the colloquy ahead of time the mission statements of both our schools and our departments (or programs). The art assignment consisted of setting out pictorially how we envisioned our school and its mission statement. As a further requirement, we needed also to put ourselves somehow and somewhere into the picture. Provided for our use were paper, crayons, felt markers, yarn, scissors, magazines, glue, and tape. Within 30 minutes we had all completed our artwork. An informed, thoughtful, deep, engaging, wide-ranging, hour-long conversation

then ensued, with each of us commenting on our pictures in light of our institutions and mission statements. It was probably one of the most successful, and certainly one of the most illuminating and enjoyable, of all the discussions we had during the week of our colloquy.

What explains its success? At least four factors come into play:

- 1) Because the artwork served as the medium through which one self-disclosed, it seemed to encourage a fuller and freer self-revealing than might otherwise have taken place. Instead of talking about oneself directly (while facing a roomful of mostly unfamiliar faces head on), one focused instead on describing and commenting on a picture.
- 2) And yet, because the produced artwork deployed a wide range of colors, materials, and styles, and played variously with matters of size, proportions, and dimensions, it often provoked a much fuller, more detailed, and more complex articulation of one's sense of location vis-à-vis the institution than might otherwise have been possible. All the elements of a picture potentially held meaning: e.g., a bright or dark palette of colors, the location of oneself vis-à-vis the institution, other persons or items included in the depiction, and so on.
- 3) Yet again, whatever explicit and self-aware intentions may have lain behind the artistic choices made, oftentimes additional and unintended revelations emerged, especially pertaining to one's perspective on, and feelings toward, one's institution. What did it mean that one participant drew their college as a prison while another depicted it as a large, leafed-out oak tree? Images that functioned metaphorically as representations of persons and/or structures sometimes conveyed far more – and far more strongly – than words could ever have done.

4) Finally, because the artwork mediated the conveyance of thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and feelings, it facilitated the question-and-answer process. Since, on the surface, questioners were simply asking about a picture, they seemed easier about posing queries that might otherwise have been deemed too fraught and/or personal. The respondents, similarly, seemed less defensive and more forthright in the answers they gave.

Why and how might this exercise function in the undergraduate classroom? Because the exercise in toto draws on aural, visual, and kinesthetic modes of learning, it embraces more fully the diverse learning styles of our different students, rather than giving preference to just one. It would further work admirably as a get-to-know-you exercise and/or for the addressing of fraught topics. For instance, I can imagine making use of this exercise near the beginning of the semester as the mode through which students introduce themselves to me and to one another. Explaining themselves through an artistic depiction may well be less intimidating than a more direct communication, and so help to offset at least some of their likely reluctance to self-disclose to a roomful of relative strangers. And since I teach, in the main, biblical studies, configuring this exercise further so that students are asked to draw their relationship to the Bible and/or religion may well solicit helpful details about, say, their knowledge of the Bible, helpful or hurtful engagements they have had with the Bible and/or religion, and how these are filtered through their families, friends, school experiences, and so on. Of course, in classes with large numbers of students, one may have to set time limits on explaining pictures, or have students subdivide into smaller groups where fuller explanations can occur (ending, perhaps, with the display of all the pictures on the classroom's walls), or assign the actual drawing work as outside homework.

This tactic can also work as a simple assist for student comprehension of challenging ideas. Recently students in my Biblical Ethics course were struggling to make sense of two different environmental ethical readings of Genesis 1-3, especially their divergent understandings of the notion of stewardship. So I asked the students to draw their own image of the created world, making sure also to place God and themselves somewhere within it. I further instructed them to decide which of the two scholarly readings of Genesis 1-3 we had been studying corresponded most closely to their own image. Sure enough, my initial drawing request prompted student hesitancy (even dismay!), but that dissipated quickly as they started drawing. Upon finishing several volunteers showed their work and explained it. The images diverged wildly in form and style, as did the explanations, and yet they all communicated meaningfully. And the exercise made quite a learning impact on students: many of them referred back to the drawings several times in subsequent class sessions.